

U.S. Democrats try to frame debate with Bush

By Thomas Ferraro

WASHINGTON (Reuters) (January 29th, 2002)- Congressional Democrats saluted President Bush's war against terrorism Tuesday but broke ranks with him on the economy as they offered their own view of the state of the union. As Bush prepared to head to Capitol Hill to give his nationally broadcast State of the Union address, Democrats framed what promises to be a long election-year debate. "Ordinary Americans are worse off today than they were one year ago," said Rep. Dennis Kucinich, an Ohio Democrat and chairman of the 57-member congressional Progressive Caucus. "In the past year, more Americans became unemployed than at any time in the last six years, 251 public companies have gone bankrupt, 11 of them Fortune 500 companies, and the national economy fell into a recession," he told a news conference. With Bush riding high in approval ratings largely as the result of the war on terrorism, Democrats want to put the president on the defensive for the economy as they head into this November's elections, when a third of the Senate and the entire House will be up for grabs. House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt of Missouri, selected to give his party's formal response to the president Tuesday night, was prepared to pounce on the Enron scandal. Aides said Gephardt would argue in his own televised address, following the one by Bush, that the collapse of energy giant Enron Corp., a major donor to both political parties, particularly Republicans, should give a new push for legislation to curb the influence of money in politics. As Gephardt, a possible 2004 White House contender, put it in a speech last week, "If nothing else, if the world's biggest bankruptcy joined at the hip with the administration's biggest contributors isn't a prime case for campaign finance reform, I don't know what is." "The real scandal here may not be what the administration did to help Enron, but what it avoided doing because it was concerned that the campaign contributions created the appearance of impropriety," Gephardt said. BIPARTISANSHIP Aides said Gephardt also planned Tuesday to possibly renew his proposal that the White House host a bipartisan summit on economic growth. The White House rejected Gephardt's call for such a summit last week, suggesting he was more interested in scoring political points than aiding the economy. Still, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle said he hoped the president came to Congress "with a message of bipartisanship." Daschle, a South Dakota Democrat, said despite election-year politics, Democrats and Republicans must work together on such fronts as economic, trade and energy policy. A number of fellow senators Tuesday wore blue-and-white button reading, "I'm a Daschle Democrat." Republicans began using the phrase, "Daschle Democrats," after the Senate leader last month successfully led a campaign against a House-passed economic stimulus package. Democrats said Tuesday the government needs to do more to help the unemployed and the uninsured while also arguing it must move to prevent a return to long-term deficits. "Our fight is about priorities," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat, charging that administration's economic and tax policies favor the wealthy. With both a recession and a war on terrorism to fight, Bush will propose in his budget next week an overall increase in spending. Much of the money would go to national defense and homeland security, setting aside earlier vows to pay down the national debt and maintain what had been four years of surpluses. Sen. Ernest Hollings, a South Carolina Democrat, likened Bush's pending budget to Enron's failed economics. "They're not going to

worry about this debt," Hollings said of administration officials. "They don't care as long as they can get their money for defense and everything else." Hollings, voicing the sentiment of many Democrats, largely blamed the nation's economic woes on Bush's \$1.35 trillion tax cut last year, not the Sept. 11 attacks. And Hollings said, "It's not going to recover, my dear friends, until we do something about this debt."